

## **A Review of the Missiological Approaches Adopted by the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in Contextualizing the Gospel in Northern Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

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This paper analyzes the missiological approaches adopted by the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in contextualizing the gospel in northern Nigeria. Christian missions in the north of Nigeria have played a central role in furthering the spread of Christianity, with COCIN being actively involved in missionary works such as evangelism, church planting, and community development programs. The success of COCIN's missions lies in its ability to contextualize its message and relation to the local cultural and religious context. The use of indigenous languages and traditional forms of communication in northern Nigeria, while embracing cultural sensitivity, has played a crucial role in facilitating the effective sharing of the Christian message and supporting the overall transformation of communities. This study uses a library-based approach to investigate how the church has successfully engaged predominantly Muslim people in northern Nigeria. It recognizes that while there are still challenges for Christian missions, these difficulties also present opportunities for thoughtful and sensitive engagement with the local context through respect for indigenous cultures, meaningful dialogue, and collaboration with various religious communities.

**Keywords:** Contextualization, Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN), Church Planting, Christian Missions, Northern Nigeria.

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### **Introduction**

In the past, missionaries successfully employed a contextualization approach to establish Christianity in Northern Nigeria despite the numerous challenges. The Christian faith was adapted to African communities' social, cultural, and religious contexts (Ayandele 1966, 503–22). This strategy enabled the church to effectively engage with the unique challenges and



opportunities in African societies and present the gospel in a more relevant and meaningful way to the African people. Religious context contributed significantly to shaping the socio-political, economic, and spiritual life of missions in northern Nigeria and is the source of major challenges in the region (Umaru 2013, 11). Northern Nigeria is an arid and semi-arid area and is known for its mixed religious composition, with Muslims occupying 53.5% of the population alongside various indigenous religious beliefs and practices (Abar 2019). In this context, Barnes (2010) explains that COCIN, a prominent and indigenous Christian denomination, committed itself to Christian missions. COCIN's mission is to effectively proclaim the gospel and address the holistic needs of the people. That is, to communicate the gospel in word and deed to build a church that is relevant to its context. This paper examines the approaches of COCIN in contextualizing the Christian message in northern Nigeria.

### **Contextualization in Christian Mission**

Charles H. Krafft defines contextualization as “the process wherein people interpret, communicate, and apply the Bible within a particular cultural context.” He adds, “Good contextualization seeks to be faithful to Scripture and meaningful to a given culture” (Kraft 1999, 384–91). It is a process of relating the gospel to cultures. As people exist, culture definitely exists, and the process of contextualization continues to bring people to an understanding of their culture (Stabell 2005, 165–78). Contextualization refers to the method and perspective of relating the gospel to culture (Whiteman 1997, 2–7). Quoting Darrel Whiteman (199), Stabell states, “Contextualization offers exciting possibilities and real challenges for church leaders around the globe who labor to represent Jesus Christ as faithfully and effectively as possible in a multitude of very different socio-cultural situations” (Stabell 2005, 165–78). Contextualization is an evolving stream of thought that relates the gospel and church to a local context. It is also an ongoing process that seeks to make the gospel at home to many dialects and sub-cultural segments (Moreau 2012, 19). Contextualization functions in three ways. First, it helps those receiving the gospel to see it as addressed specifically and powerfully to them in their own concrete circumstances. Tienou (1993, 246) speaks of the gospel becoming rooted in the different social and cultural contexts to which it comes.

Second, contextualizing the gospel enables its message to confront what is wrong and sinful in the socio-cultural context. Whiteman refers to this as an “offensive” function, while Stephen Bevans (1995, 117–124) speaks of a model of contextualization that he describes as



“countercultural.” As Whiteman suggests, the third function is that efforts made to contextualize the message can potentially help the whole people of God. The church universally comes to a deeper corporate understanding of the nature and power of the gospel.

Consequently, contextualization helps communicate the gospel in a way that people will understand in their own terms from their own worldview so that they feel that Christ has come to give them abundant life. Contextualization fulfills, rather than destroys, a people’s culture. It enables us to critique culture so that the offense of the gospel convicts people of personal and corporate sin; thus, people are offended for the right reasons (Aram 2015, n.p.). Contextualization helps build community in two ways: it transforms the local community and connects it to the larger global community. In this way, it enlarges the understanding of how Christianity shapes people and their cultures. It expands knowledge of the gospel and the kingdom of God. However, Flemming (2009) explains that some mission agencies and Western-trained church leaders often resist contextualization, thus resulting in a gospel witness that does not engage the realities of the local people.

The authority of the Bible is central in the contextualization process. The Bible must have the ultimate authority in the lives of believers and should not allow culture to twist or obscure biblical teaching. Christians begin by interpreting the Bible and then consider potential implications for culture. One interprets the Bible and then applies or communicates its message within the culture (Carson 2019, 1). This sequence stems from evangelicals’ commitment to biblical authority. Thus, contextualization is a process of applying and communicating biblical truth.

### **Contextualization of Missions in Northern Nigeria**

The history of Christian missions in northern Nigeria happened against the backdrop of intertribal conflicts and wars between rival kingdoms and local communities. In the past, the Bible was presented as a substitute for the slave trade (Egbunu 2022, xiv). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western missionaries and their African counterpart were instrumental in the Christianization of northern Nigeria, particularly in the roles played by the Sudan United Mission (SUM) and the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). SUM gave birth to COCIN and remained the second-largest mission operating in Northern Nigeria (Barnes 2010, 440–54). SUM is a union organization that grew out of the Sudan Pioneer Mission (SPM), founded in January 1900 at Assuan on the upper Nile (Kumm 1918, 295–98). One of the leading principles that made the



SUM unique is the Indigenous Policy that centered on the three “self-principles” of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation, which SUM successfully implemented (Rengshwat 2012, 1–140). Church of Christ in Nation accepts it as part of the principle laid down for the church's operation.

Meanwhile, the Christian mission in what was known as the Sudan belt South of the Saharan between Senegal and Ethiopia was yet to be effectively reached in the late nineteenth century. Sanneh (2015, n.p) described Sudan as “the worst manned mission field in the whole world” due to the multiple difficulties missionaries faced while establishing their operations in this area. However, missionary efforts to reach Sudan started taking center stage in many missionary conferences, and the Sudan Missionary Movement strongly influenced the need for global evangelization (Akintayo, 2023). The consequent passion for Sudan inspired some faith-based mission organizations, such as Sudan Interior Mission led by Thomas Kent, Walter Gowans, Rowland Bingham, and Sudan United Mission led by Karl Kumm, Ambrose Batema, John G. Burt, and Lowry J. Maxwell.

Kumm, who was the Livingstone of Sudan, is known as the German founder of the Sudan United Mission who pioneered the task of penetrating this region and eventually established and expanded major mission work in Nigeria, as well as Cameroon, Chad, and Sudan (Bowers 2018, n.p.). Bowers noted,

The missionary career of Kumm began in Egypt where he met and married his Wife Lucy Guinness. Having felt called to the unreached “Sudan belt,” they organized the SPM in 1901 under the auspices of a board that was largely based in Germany. Kumm was dismissed from SPM because of the tension that evolved between Kumm and the Board mainly about how to reach the Muslim cultures of that day. He was accused of being the wrong person, pursuing the wrong goals, at the wrong time, with the wrong methods, in the wrong field, and from the wrong base. This led to the founding of Sudan United Mission (SUM) in 1904, this time based on British missions (Bowers 2018, n.p.).

The first mission to Sudan was embarked by four pioneer missionaries, Kumm, Batema, Burt, and Maxwell, who left Europe for Nigeria on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1904 through a board called “Akabo” and arrived in Burutu on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1904. In his dialogue with Sir Frederick Lugard, Kumm was advised to establish a mission station at Wase, which was north of Ibi (Dada 2014, 243). These missionaries had a series of challenges, such as the glaring dangers of disease, inclement weather, lack of easy means of transportation, and even slave-raiding armies. Nevertheless, these missionaries were not deterred. They arrived in Wase, a Plateau State of



Nigeria town, on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1904. SUM comprised Christians from different denominations in Europe, North America, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand (Anyanwu 2022, 49–50). As the need for more mission workers continued, other missionaries were mobilized from different countries, including Norway, the United States, and Canada, which led to the establishment of mission stations in several districts in northern Nigeria. Their labors produced a few churches, as well as schools and hospitals, to meet the holistic needs of the people (Anyanwu 2022, 50). According to Klaus Fiedler, the Sudan United Mission was, in its beginning, closely linked to the Evangelical Lutheran Theological Institution (ELTI). However, SUM became a faith mission with denominational and nondenominational branches (Fiedler 2018, 61).

Harvey Kwiyani employs the term "mission" to describe the work of bridging the divide between belief in Jesus Christ and unbelief. The basic functions of the Christian mission are liberation, dialogue, and nurture. Also, the fundamental question examines the transition from one cultural context to another (Kwiyani 2014, 6). Scholars have argued about Western missionaries' lack of contextualizing the gospel in Africa. For instance, Celecein Joseph noted that most Western missionaries do not have contextualized knowledge of the indigenous pedagogy that makes sense of African reality and experience in the world (Celecein 2022, 115). Perhaps the invisibility of non-Western worldview and cosmology in the theological curriculum and canon has contributed to the conceptual difference and cultural misunderstanding (Celecein 2022, 115). Isaiah Olatoyan opines that many early Western missionaries and scholars who pioneered the mission work in Africa contributed their share to Africa's problem because of the lack of fit between their presentation of Christian theology and African life (Olatoyan 2024, n.p.). Thus, the Western missionary strategy has been severely criticized for not adequately understanding the African people's worldview and religious dimensions.

Despite the numerous flaws in their approaches, many Christian missions significantly impacted African societies using a contextual approach, which helped their missions succeed. Some essential contextual strategies include education, healthcare, and social services. Missionaries in organizations such as the Roman Catholic Church, COCIN, and Anglican Church established hospitals and schools also to train converts and locals. They led the way in promoting literacy, healthcare, and social welfare in African societies. The missionaries adopted the 3C's approach (Christianity, Commerce, and Civilization) to bring holistic transformation to Africa. The strategy was used with the belief that Europe would Christianize, civilize, and bring



a new form of commerce (to replace the slave trade) to Africa (Bruner and Kirkpatrick, 2022). While this approach arguably succeeded, it was also grossly abused. The Three C's were a key tool in the colonialist mission to subjugate and exploit Africa, which European powers used to justify their imperialist and colonialist endeavors (Adeleke 2014, 22). For instance, Christianity was used as a tool for colonialization, and many missionaries served as mediators between Africans and the colonial government. In addition, civilization was a means of imposition of European cultural norms, values, and institutions on African societies. Further, commerce was used as an economic justification for European powers to exploit Africa's natural resources, labor, and markets for economic gain. Andrew Walls also observed that,

Western missionaries had two identities; they were representative Christians who made significant efforts to present, demonstrate, and do things that were specifically characteristically Christian. They were seeking to share the knowledge of Christ and made choices amid Western expansion to live in a Christian way. However, they were also representative of Westerners, shaped by Western historical conditions and values, and Western social networks and intellectual discourse (Walls 2015, n.p.).

However, it is worth noting that the missionary movement sought to engage with the cultures of the rest of the world, which has impacted the field of mission studies (Walls 2015). Also, in recent decades, the impact of Western missions on Africa has evolved as many African Christians have taken leadership roles in mission-established churches and Christian communities. Many African leaders have sought to contextualize the Christian faith within the African cultural and social contexts. Thus, African theologians and church leaders have played key roles in shaping a more indigenous and relevant expression of Christianity in Africa, one rooted in the traditions and values of the continent.

### **Missiological Strategies of Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in Northern Nigeria**

The mission strategy of Sudan United Mission (SUM) is connected with the *laissez-faire* philosophy of colonialism that continued to take place in Nigeria. That is, the focus of development took place only where colonialists would enhance their business, which indeed increased monopoly as the majority of the belt people who belonged to minority tribes were excluded (Boer 1983). Missionary narratives of the time frequently emphasized Africa's spiritual and social struggles.

Hermann Kumm, founder of the Sudan United Mission (SUM), vividly described Africa's suffering under economic marginalization, portraying the continent as languishing in "utter



darkness that needs immediate redemption" (Boer, 1983, pp. 170–171). He highlighted the devastating effects of Arab slavery and raids by Muslim emirs, who pillaged communities, taking lives and enslaving captives. While Kumm criticized these practices, he also condemned Europe—often viewed as a "haven of light, liberty, and civilization"—for failing to live up to its Christian values despite owing its progress to biblical principles (Boer, 1983, pp. 170–171). He urged missionaries to persist in their efforts, arguing that northern Nigeria required education rooted in "Christian European principles" alongside the promotion of "human integrity and human ideals" (Boer, 1983, pp. 170–171).

The driving force of SUM's mission strategy, in contrast with others, was liberty and justice. Hence, SUM had the feeling of paternalism in comparison with the degrading Western perspective of Africa. Kumm did not differentiate between Europe and Africa, asserting that the distinction between them was in exposure to the gospel, thus affirming that only through time and opportunity will Africa reach the same height as Europe (Boer 1983, 172).

### ***The Use of Indigenous Languages and Traditional Forms of Communication***

The evangelization of northern Nigeria, particularly the Middle Belt region, significantly changed northern Nigeria's socio-political and religious landscape. Despite the complexities introduced by globalization—including socio-political disparities, resistance, conflict, and transformation—the missionary endeavor persistently worked to establish Christianity as a comprehensive and integrative force (Chigere 2001, 3). Christianity facilitated significant socio-religious shifts, enabling northern Nigeria to transcend historical barriers and integrate into the global Christian community.

In addition, the Christian mission's key strategy was using indigenous people and language. The missionaries were conscious of the cultural settings of northern Nigeria; therefore, they learned the people's language to reach the people in their local dialects. This was typical with the missionaries who came to the Middle Belt of Nigeria; for instance, Birom communities first committed themselves to learning the language to start mission stations (Kolapo 2019 4–9). The legacy of engaging indigenous people and language in northern Nigeria has its foundation in the legacy of Samuel Ajayi Crowder. According to Femi Kolapo,

From the beginning of the Niger Mission in the Niger-Benue Confluence region, which was inappropriately called Central Africa and where Islam was the state religion, Crowther was the first to establish and introduce Christianity in a fully Islamic state. Second, all his missionary agents were native agents due to



the strong competitive position that the already established Islam with its jihadist and militant paused to Christianity. Third, because Crowther's agents were not Europeans, they were conceived to be less culturally prejudiced against the local population, which offers them equivalent liberty of action with the local people in their relationship to the missionaries and their program (Kolapo 2019 4–9).

Similarly, as other Western missionary organizations such as Sudan United Missions and Sudan Interior Mission went into the interior parts of Nigeria, they adopted the already established strategy of Crowther. Not only did missionaries learn the people's language to reach out, but they also trained the people to reach their people. Hence, the people were more than what Justine Bradford described as people “in-between” (Bradford 2012, 4); instead, they were actively involved in evangelizing to their people. Shaw (2016) stated that when SUM missionaries evangelized many communities, they selected some people and offered them literacy programs, where people were empowered with some evangelistic basic training on how to reach out to others. Consequently, with initial contact with the missionaries, the locals evangelized indigenous communities.

Furthermore, the missionaries did not just train indigenes on the principles of evangelism; instead, many converts were sent abroad for higher education. They were offered scholarships based on leadership potential and linguistic skills. Upon their return, these converted indigenes were sent to various theological institutions to equip learners with the necessary skills and knowledge to contextualize the gospel in their communities. This approach helped the early SUM missionaries to quickly spread to various parts of northern Nigeria, especially in the mid-central region, particularly Plateau State (Kolapo 2019 4–9).

The second strategy of SUM in northern Nigeria was the use of translation. According to Lamin Sanneh, from the early beginning, Christianity identified itself with the need to translate out of Aramaic and Hebrew, and in its early stage, the disciples came to a clear and firm position regarding the translatability of the gospel, with a commitment to the pluralist merit of culture within God's universal purpose (Sanneh 2015, n.p ). Similarly, missionaries to Africa, like those under the Sudan United Mission in northern Nigeria, used the indigenous language to reach the people. Translation work was inextricably linked with literacy and education. The pioneer missionaries developed writing systems or orthographies for new languages and literacy programs to teach people how to read (Mojola 2020). Learning indigenous languages became an essential assignment for the early missionaries in this area. As a result, the Bible was translated





and written in local languages for contextual understanding (Kaplan 2016, 65). The efforts of missionaries developed and preserved the local cultures and languages (Shaw 2016, 228).

### ***Cultural Sensitivity***

A missionary must understand people's culture, religion, and tradition because it leads to sound biblical contextualization of the Bible in the host community (Liberty and Kilpatrick 2012, 5). According to Elizabeth Isichei, missionaries faced the dilemma of the relationship between the gospel and African culture. There was the fear by faith missions, such as SUM, that converts would be motivated by material factors; therefore, they insisted that African culture remain unchanged (Isichei 1995, 93). Encounters between Christianity and the host cultural setting of many African societies were complicated. However, SUM was culturally sensitive, especially among the minority tribes in northern Nigeria.

According to Gaiya, Musa, and Rengshwat (2014, pp. 263–86), the sensitivity of SUM missionaries to the culture of the people of the Middle Belt helped develop trust and rapport with the indigenous people, which gave them easy acceptance and credibility within the community. When the missionaries showed some respect for the cultural practices of the people, like eating their food and participating in some of their traditional festivals, it paved the way for the missionaries to communicate their message, or sometimes, the locals who could not understand the white man's language willingly send their children to be taught by the missionaries.

In addition, Gaiya, Musa, and Rengshwat (2014, pp. 263–86) assert that the missionaries were sensitive to the people's way of life, which helped shape their worldview about the people's belief system. When SUM missionaries came to northern Nigeria, they did not destroy the people's culture. The minority ethnic groups were already battling the suppression from Islam. These northerners, with their traditional religious belief, examined the activities of the Christian missionaries and how they confronted colonial authorities and their relationship with the emirs; hence, they accepted Christianity without much struggle. According to Musa Gaiya and Jordan Rengshwat, the region called Middle Belt of Northern Nigeria was Christianized in the 1950s and is still referred to as such because of the efforts of Christian missionaries in northern Nigeria, which led to the development that was later known as the Bible Belt of Northern Nigeria (Gaiya and Rengshwat 2014, 236). It is worth noting that many Western missionaries had a wrong perception of the African worldviews. Grand LeMarquand called the missionary worldview of



Africa quasi-scientific, stating that they were no more than cultural crutches that lacked existential dynamism (LeMarquand 2004, 16).

Furthermore, to contextualize the gospel in northern Nigeria, the Missionaries adapted to the people's communication methods. They gradually became experts in using local languages, storytelling, and other culturally relevant approaches to convey their message, especially as many people were illiterate. Many were converted by seeing how missionaries showed kindness, demonstrated mutuality and respect, and defended the people against the suppression of Islamic leaders and jihadists. People were particularly fascinated when they saw how missionaries participated in some of their cultural activities. This opened the door for SUM missionaries to impact the native communities significantly and win many to the faith.

### **The Missional Approach of COCIN**

Several missiological terms have been used to express the activity relating the gospel to local cultures and contexts, such as adaptation, indigenization, and translation. These words have fallen out of place and replaced with three other terms: enculturation, inculturation, and acculturation. Meanwhile, contextualization involves how the gospel is revealed in Scripture authentically in each cultural, social, religious, and historical setting (Flemming 2009, 13). Thus, contextualization embraces the whole process of interfacing the Christian gospel within all contexts (Danfulani 2018, 190). Affirmatively, without contextualization, the gospel will continue to be foreign, and people will lose what they have grown up cherishing. The missionary presence in North Central Nigeria played a pivotal role in countering systemic socio-political and cultural subjugation under Muslim elites, which might otherwise have perpetuated marginalization within modern Nigeria's hierarchical structures. Thus, contemporary African Christians should critically engage with historical missiological issues as they contextualize the Great Commission within postcolonial realities.

The activities of the Sudan United Mission in northern Nigeria were not without challenges. Missionaries faced both internal and external challenges, yet the mission organization succeeded due to various factors. For instance, the success of SUM led to the establishment of the Church Of Christ In Nigeria (COCIN). The name has now changed to Church Of Christ In Nations (COCIN) due to the church organization's growth beyond Nigeria's borders. The need to contextualize the missional approach of SUM calls for tailoring the mission strategies, activities, and methods to effectively engage with local communities and address



specific needs and practices (Soegianto and Lolong 2023, 48–55). Contextualization means tailoring the gospel presentation for a particular context or culture, which is more than learning the language because culture forms the common ideas, feelings, and values that guide us (McRae 2014, xi). Therefore, respecting indigenous cultures and fostering meaningful dialogue and collaboration with diverse religious communities is essential. This calls for cooperation with local leaders and existing organizations and adaptation of communication and outreach efforts to resonate with the African context. Accordingly, with the changing mission frontier, contextualizing mission activities requires a partnership that considers political, economic, social, and cultural issues as part of its mission activities (Cueva 2015, 196). Understanding these contextual factors is essential for 21<sup>st</sup>-century missionaries and other mission organizations to effectively carry out their mission work and positively impact many African communities.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the contextual missiological strategies employed by the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in its evangelization efforts within Northern Nigeria's predominantly Muslim context. The study evaluated COCIN's effectiveness in engaging Islamic communities while maintaining theological integrity. COCIN, an indigenous Christian denomination, seeks to address the holistic needs of the people. Through contextualization, missionaries succeeded in establishing Christianity despite the numerous challenges in their host communities. Key contextualization strategies adopted by COCIN missionaries in Northern Nigeria include using indigenous languages and traditional forms of communication and embracing cultural sensitivity. This foundational understanding fosters contextualization of the Bible, ensuring that Scripture resonates meaningfully within local worldviews while preserving its integrity. Missionaries utilized available communication methods, such as local languages and oral tradition forms, such as storytelling and other culturally relevant approaches, to proclaim the gospel.

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